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**Coordination and integration of international statistical programmes**

## Report of the Secretary-General on options for the meetings of the Statistical Commission and its Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination

*Summary*

The present report has been prepared in response to a request made at the nineteenth session of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination of the Statistical Commission (New York, 10–12 February 1998) (see E/CN.3/1999/20, para. 35 (d)). The report investigates the feasibility of holding annual instead of biennial Commission sessions and the procedure for introducing such a change. The report concludes that if the Commission wishes to meet annually it should recommend a draft resolution to that effect for adoption by the Economic and Social Council. The report also investigates to what extent the Commission can delegate additional authority to its Working Group, and concludes that the Commission may change the terms of reference of the Working Group to give it additional authority.

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# I. Introduction

1. At its nineteenth session, (New York, 10–12 February 1998), the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination of the Statistical Commission considered the report of the ad hoc group established by the Statistical Commission to explore new approaches to its structure and operation (E/CN.3/AC.1/1998/L.8). The Working Group endorsed the report subject to revision in the light of the comments made during the discussion and comments to be made later in writing, for submission to the Statistical Commission at its thirtieth session, and requested Mr. W. de Vries of the Netherlands to prepare the revised report (see E/CN.3/1999/20, para. 35 (b)). That revised report is before the Commission (E/CN.3/1999/23, annex).

2. The Working Group also expressed a very strong preference for the Statistical Commission to meet annually instead of the Commission and its Working Group meeting in alternate years, and requested the United Nations Statistics Division to submit to the Statistical Commission at its thirtieth session a report on the feasibility of holding annual Commission sessions, covering the legal, financial and other aspects of such a change. In addition, in the event that holding annual Commission sessions might not be acceptable to the Economic and Social Council or that such a change could not be enacted immediately, the Working Group requested that the report discuss to what extent the Commission could delegate authority to its Working Group, as well as any related issues stemming from the report of the ad hoc group (see E/CN.3/1999/20, para. 35 (d)). The present report has been prepared in response to that request.

# II. Annual meetings of the Commission

## A. Consequences of holding annual sessions

3. Annual sessions would allow the Commission to deal with emerging topics and urgent issues on a more timely basis, providing continuity of the Commission's decision-making and oversight of the global statistical process. They would also improve the ability of the Commission to more continuously carry out its role in the follow-up of the statistical implications of major United Nations conferences and summits, as well as the agreed conclusions of the Economic and Social Council's high-level and coordination segments and its resolutions, which the Working Group of the Commission has placed on the agenda of the Commission as a standing item (see E/CN.3/1999/20, para. 26).

4. Member States are elected to the Commission for four-year terms. Holding Commission sessions annually would allow more continuity in the Commission's work since during a four-year term member States would be represented at four sessions rather than only two sessions as is currently the case. Annual meetings would also increase the likelihood of the same representative(s) attending, providing an additional element of continuity.

5. With annual meetings of the Commission in place, the Working Group would no longer be needed since the Commission could do the work that is currently done by the Working Group, and the Working Group could be disbanded immediately.

6. An additional workload would be placed on the United Nations Statistics Division and other parts of the United Nations Secretariat since preparation for a Commission session is a larger undertaking than preparation for a Working Group session in terms of substance, documentation, services and organizational effort. Holding a Commission session every year would impose additional costs compared with holding a Commission session in one year and a Working Group session in the next year. The main elements of additional costs would be (a) one additional day of conference services and (b) air fares for members of the Commission who are not currently members of the Working Group (12 air fares). Should a draft resolution on the issue be proposed (see para. 7 below), estimated costs of those elements will be submitted to the Commission in the form of a programme budget implications statement.

## B. Procedure for introducing annual sessions

7. The Economic and Social Council is the decision maker on such issues as the frequency and length of meetings of the Statistical Commission. To obtain a decision, the Statistical Commission would have to recommend a draft resolution for adoption by the Council. The Council would consider the draft resolution in the context of, *inter alia*, existing Council and General Assembly resolutions specifying the frequency of meetings of subsidiary bodies, the rules of procedures of the functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council,[1] and the cost implications mentioned in paragraph 6 above.

8. Existing resolutions include Economic and Social Council resolution 414 B.I (XIII) of 1951, reconfirmed by Council resolution 557 C (XVIII) of 1954, in which the Council decided that some commissions, including the Statistical Commission, should meet every two years. In those same resolutions, the Council decided that certain

other commissions should meet annually, and in its resolution 557 C (XVIII), the Council decided that one commission which had previously met every two years would meet annually. Subsequently, the Council and the General Assembly have made other decisions concerning the frequency of meetings of the functional commissions, and the current situation may be summarized as follows: two commissions meet every second year (Statistical Commission, Commission on Science and Technology for Development) and seven commissions meet annually (Commission on Population and Development, Commission for Social Development, Commission on Human Rights, Commission on the Status of Women (until 2000), Commission on Narcotic Drugs, Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, Commission on Sustainable Development).[2] The rules of procedure of the functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council provide that unless the Council decides otherwise, the functional commission shall hold sessions biennially.[3]

9. Decisions to authorize annual meetings have normally been based on the nature of the ongoing responsibilities inherent in each commission's terms of reference; on emerging special topics of worldwide concern for the substantive areas of work of each commission; and more recently, on the need to follow up in a consistent and focused manner the programmes of action set out by world summits, conferences, declarations and strategies.[2]

### C. Key procedural elements

10. The key procedural elements for introducing annual Commission sessions are:

(a) Recommendation by the Commission of a draft resolution for adoption by the Economic and Social Council by which the Council would establish annual sessions;

(b) Acceptance by the Council of the substantive arguments in support of the Commission's recommendation, taking account of the cost implications, and thereafter adoption of the resolution by the Council.

## III. Delegation of additional authority to the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination

### A. Origin of the Working Group

11. The Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination was established by the Economic and Social Council in its resolution 1306 (XLIV) of 31 May 1968, on the recommendation of the Statistical Commission at its fifteenth session (1968).[4] It was given a specific task to perform, namely, providing a report for members of the Statistical Commission prior to its sixteenth session on progress made in establishing an integrated programme and in ensuring the necessary coordination in fields where its absence is greatest.

12. At its sixteenth session, the Statistical Commission agreed that the Working Group established under Council resolution 1306 (XLIV) should be continued and its activities concentrated on the review of all major issues in the area of coordination and integration, and on matters of the coordination of electronic data processing, where the interests of national statistical offices in the future work of the international organizations are of particular importance.[5]

13. The Statistical Commission, at its seventeenth session, in 1970, agreed that the terms of reference of the Working Group should be modified to the following:[6]

(a) To deal with questions of policy, coordination and priorities of the statistical programmes of the United Nations system;

(b) To constitute a means by which the Commission could maintain contact, between biennial meetings, with the work of the United Nations Statistics Division and the statistical services of the specialized agencies;

(c) To consider current questions, relating to the United Nations system, of organization, policies, arrangements and priorities for the electronic data processing of economic and social statistics, including data banks;

(d) To consider questions regarding the statistics required for purposes of the reviews and appraisals during the Second United Nations Development Decade.

14. Thus, the terms of reference for the Working Group were changed by the Commission itself, without recommending a draft decision or resolution for adoption by the Council. Other aspects of the functioning of the Working Group have also been established/changed by the

Commission on its own authority, including the frequency of meetings and the composition of the Working Group.

## B. Proposed new terms of reference

15. At its twenty-seventh session (New York, 22 February–3 March 1993), the Statistical Commission agreed that an expanded role should be given to the Working Group to allow more continuous leadership to be provided to the global statistical system, and that the Working Group should take on an even more comprehensive catalytic and continuous role in coordination of the global statistical system.[7] At its nineteenth session (New York, 10–12 February 1998), the Working Group endorsed the report of the ad hoc group established by the Statistical Commission to explore new approaches to its structure and operation (E/CN.3/AC.1/1998/L.8), which, *inter alia*, recommended, for the sake of enhancing continuity, that the Commission:

(a) Consider its Working Group, de facto, as a continuation of the Commission itself in the years that the Commission does not meet (see E/CN.3/AC.1/1998/L.8, para. 1 (b));

(b) Consider that the role of the Commission and its Working Group includes (i) promoting the development and adoption of world statistical standards; (ii) deciding on methodological programme orientations and priorities at the global level; and (iii) monitoring progress on the implementation of agreed world statistical standards (see E/CN.3/AC.1/1998/L.8, para. 5).

16. Draft revised terms of reference are set out below, building on the current terms of reference and reflecting the developments referred to in paragraph 15 above. Such terms of reference would enable the Working Group to make all decisions that the Commission itself is able to make, allowing the Working Group, for example, to approve draft recommendations and guidelines, including classifications for adoption by countries. It would also allow decisions to be made in-between Commission sessions, avoiding the delays in dealing with statistical issues that currently occur as a result of the biennial meeting cycle of the Statistical Commission. The proposed draft terms of reference are that the Working Group should:

(a) Deal with questions of policy, coordination and priorities of the statistical programmes of the United Nations system;

(b) Constitute a means by which the Statistical Commission may maintain contact, between biennial meetings, with the statistical work of the United Nations system;

(c) Continue the work of the Statistical Commission in years in which the Commission does not meet. In particular:

(i) Consider and approve any changes considered necessary in the work programme or priorities of the United Nations Statistics Division, within the existing approved budget and medium-term plan;

(ii) Consider and approve recommendations and guidelines concerning concepts, definitions, classifications and other elements of statistical methodology within the purview of the Statistical Commission;

(iii) Follow up the statistical implications of major United Nations conferences and summits, as well as the agreed conclusions of the Council's high-level and coordination segments and its resolutions;

(iv) Take all other actions, as necessary, within the purview of the Statistical Commission;

(d) Review the agenda and documentation for the biennial sessions of the Statistical Commission, including identifying special issues of concern for the development of international statistics for review by the Commission.

17. Subparagraphs 16 (a) and (b) above are modified from the existing terms of reference; subparagraph 16 (c) is new; and subparagraph 16 (d) formalizes a long-standing practice.

## C. Procedure for delegating authority to the Working Group

18. In most cases, working groups have been established and given terms of reference by the Economic and Social Council acting on the recommendation of a functional commission (Commission on Human Rights Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Commission on Narcotic Drugs Subcommission on Illicit Drug Traffic and Related Matters in the Near and Middle East, Commission on Sustainable Development Open-ended Ad Hoc Intergovernmental Panel on Forests), although in at least one case this was done by a functional commission under its own authority (Commission on Human Rights Working Group on Enforced Disappearances). While the Council established the Working Group on Statistical Programmes and Coordination on the recommendation of the Statistical Commission and gave it its initial terms of reference, the Statistical Commission itself modified the terms of reference to establish the current

terms of reference of the Working Group. Consistent with that past practice and since the rules of procedure of the functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council do not state otherwise, it is the Secretariat's view that the Commission itself may change the terms of reference without seeking the Council's endorsement since this is considered an internal matter of the Commission.

## IV. Other issues

19. The Working Group also requested (see E/CN.3/1999/20, para. 35 (d)) that the present report also address any related issues stemming from the report of the ad hoc group. Having reviewed the report, the Secretariat wishes to raise only one additional point, namely the functioning of the Bureau. It is the Secretariat's view that there are no legal, financial or other barriers to the Bureau functioning as proposed in paragraphs 18 and 19 of the report.

## V. Decisions to be made by the Commission

20. The Commission should:

(a) Decide whether or not it wishes to recommend a draft resolution for adoption by the Council by which the Council would establish annual sessions of the Commission and discontinue the Working Group; an informal draft text is being circulated to members of the Commission for its consideration;

(b) If the Commission decides not to recommend such a resolution for adoption by the Council, it should decide whether or not it wishes to adopt new terms of reference for the Working Group so as to delegate additional authority to the Working Group. In the event that the Commission decides to adopt new terms of reference, draft terms of reference are set out in paragraph 14 above for its consideration.

*Notes*

[1] Rules of Procedure of the Functional Commissions of the Economic and Social Council, E/5975/Rev.1.

[2] See Council resolution 557 C (XVIII) (Statistical Commission); General Assembly resolution 46/235 (Commission on Science and Technology for Development); General Assembly resolution 49/128 and Council resolution 1995/209 (Commission on Population and Development); Council resolution 1996/7 (Commission for Social Development); Council resolution 557 C (XVIII) (Commission on Human Rights); Council resolution 1987/21 (Commission on the Status of Women); Council resolution 1991/39 (Commission on Narcotic Drugs); Council decision 1993/242 (Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice); General Assembly resolution 47/191 and Council decision 1993/207 (Commission on Sustainable Development).

[3] See rules of procedure of the functional commissions of the Economic and Social Council, E/5975/Rev.1, Rule 1.

[4] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1968, Supplement No. 10* (E/4471), para. 100 and chap. XV, draft resolution 2.

[5] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1970, Supplement No. 2* (E/4938), para. 64.

[6] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1972, Supplement No. 2* (E/5236), para. 207.

[7] *Official records of the Economic and Social Council, 1993, Supplement No. 6* (E/1993/26), paras. 16 and 18.